

*God's Law*  
Acts 4:5-12  
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Maybe you have seen the one of the frequent sketches on Saturday Night Live concerning how differently white people and Black people experience civic life. These skits usually feature Black cast members like Kenan Thompson or Michael Che in dialogue with lily white cast like Kate McKinnon or Colin Hanks. They often show Black and white people in neighborly conversation with each other trying keep in harmonious agreement even when differences are apparent in their lived experience. One recent sketch cast them as a team of Minnesota news commentators discussing the trial of Derek Chauvin. The white commentators, played by Kate McKinnon and Alex Moffat, repeatedly assert that Chauvin will undoubtedly be found guilty. The evidence is clear, they keep saying, the video footage undeniable, the courtroom testimony so devastating. Surely we can all agree there's no way this jury will not convict. But the Black commentators played by Kenan Thompson and Ego Nwodim aren't at all convinced the jury will deliver a guilty verdict. "Let's just say we've seen this movie before," one of them says, referring to the long history of cases where the courts have failed to hold police accountable for the deaths of Black citizens. For several minutes they continue in this way - the white characters doing their best to state obvious areas of agreement and the Black characters politely insisting that their experience teaches otherwise. They continue straining to keep the conversation civil in the minced dialect of Minnesota Nice before giving up to talk about the only thing they can agree on, the weather.

I feel so relieved that the jury in this case actually delivered the right verdict. But I know what the SNL sketches capture are true, too. This verdict was an exception to the more common failure of our justice system to protect African American people. This condition of fear and insecurity for people of color continues because white people represented by those nice white commentators genuinely live in a different reality. We have no cause to fear police in day-to-day interactions, so we live in denial that police practices can be so punitive and threatening to people of color. The Chauvin verdict was such a relief because it broke with what we've come to expect. This kind of violence is not rare. It happens every day. In fact it's so common that it almost never makes the news. The only thing exceptional about George Floyd's death is that it has gotten such attention.

So as Christian people we are pressed with the question of how we relate to a justice system that does not dependably deliver justice. How we get justice is a biblical question at the heart of scripture. When we talk about the Ten Commandments, we describe them as God's law. "Thou shalt not murder," is among them. Jewish and Christian scripture is so concerned with the delivery of justice that stories of crime, court, judges, and prisons are not uncommon in biblical literature. There are numerous trials in the Bible - and almost all of them ended tragically. Are the origins of our faith not in an unjust trial? So Christians are called to wrestle with more than the question of guilt or innocence. We are concerned with love and justice. We're called to sincere and continuous wrestling with great questions of authority and judgment. We are disciples of one who was crucified by an unjust court. We are children of a God who did not accept the verdict of an unjust court. God raised to new life the one put to death by our system of justice. Skepticism that our courts will deliver justice for people of color is skepticism in the name of Jesus. Said the Black characters, we've seen this movie before. In fact we read the script in the Bible.

From the scriptural library of unjust courts our text for today provides another example. Peter and John have been indicted for healing a man. In the Acts of the Apostles, a chronicle of activity in the early church, we read not about a murder trial but a resurrection trial. "By what power and by what name," demands the judge, did you heal the man at the Beautiful Gate? It's comparatively easy to investigate and prosecute a resurrection trial. All the evidence you need is here. By definition, the body is not missing. The man who should be dead is alive, pretty compelling evidence against those charged with resurrecting him. Peter and John respond with the indignation you might expect of those who stand accused of doing the right thing. "If we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and God raised from the dead." Peter and John say that they are healing in the name of Jesus, so it is not surprising that they are being tried for the same crimes that Jesus was tried for in the same court that condemned Jesus to death. Knowing the outcome of Jesus's case, Peter and John aren't at all convinced they are getting a fair trial.

I don't know if anybody came to church today to hear the pastor talk about the death of George Floyd. More likely, you came to church hoping for a break from conversation about things like this. I've preached quite a lot of sermons about racial justice and police violence and I never feel very good about them. That may be because a sermon is supposed to proclaim the Good News, and good news is hard to find in stories like this. The defendant is guilty, and that's incredibly sad. The jury reached the right verdict, and that's good news with a lowercase g, but it's not the Gospel. The good news can't be that the courts *sometimes* get it right.

But I do think it helps to remember, when we are accustomed to disappointment in the delivery of justice, that God desires even more than we do for healing and righteousness and love to prevail in our common life. And if we reject the verdicts of our courts that fall short of perfect love, then so much more does God reject those verdicts. So much more does God desire justice. In the history of the early church we can see that the resurrection of Jesus inspired life-giving action. So my prayer for us in the shadow of George Floyd's death is that we may give thanks for this verdict as some approximation of justice - and that we will not take this verdict for granted nor grow weary with despair when similar cases do not reach a similarly just conclusion. For this is a very long race and we know that Christ is crucified again every day. Our discipline is to resist despair. It's a daily practice of faith to keep our cynicism at bay. As a community of hope and healing we are empowered by the God of Eastertide to give life in the presence of death. We have to remember Peter and John who persisted in their ministry even when the law treated their love with such contempt. Do not forget that those persecuted by our system can be healers in Jesus's name.